the fox and the hound

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by microbiologistmusings

Summary

See, Jack Abbot is a fox.

His Daddy was a wolf and his Mama was a sheep.

But Jack is a fox.

(Or, Jack tries his hardest to love Robby, as a young man from an abusive home).

Notes

Enjoy! 😶 This is HEAVY. Be warned. Also, I basically transcribed Jack in my accent. So he's a Texan. Let me have this.

Beginning quote is from Disney's The Fox and The Hound.

“We’ll be friends forever, won’t we?”

Jack realizes he’s a fox when he’s six years old and his stitches look funny in the mirror, which ain’t fair because he spent ages trying to get ’em right. He’d done ’em the same way his Mama made the quilt on his bed, all tiny and careful, neat little black loop-de-loops pulled tight and straight. Mama always said the secret was patience, and Jack had plenty of that. Patience came easy when you learned early how to sit still and quiet, lest you end up kissin’ a buckle. But the mirror don’t lie. The skin around the cuts is puckered and mad, the thread pulling wrong no matter how hard he tries. His face looks strange and twisted, and that’s when it hits him.

See, Jack Abbot is a *fox*.

Foxes get hurt and keep on moving. They don’t cry when it counts. He swallows the blood from his split lip, tastes copper and salt, and keeps on going. Crying only makes noise, and noise gets you noticed. He knows that much for sure. He fights when he has to and hides when he can, just to stay alive. He eats anything he can find — cold beans straight from the can with the lid as a spoon, crusts, scraps, things most folks wouldn’t touch — just to keep hisself going, keep hisself alive. He’s seen foxes take round after round of buckshot from his Daddy’s rifle and keep on moving. Daddy always says they is hard to kill, says it like it’s a bad thing. Jack learns different. See, hard to kill meant you still got a chance to stay alive.

He looks again at his stitches and thinks maybe they’re bad on account of his hands shaking so much. His fingers won’t mind him, twitching like they got ideas of their own. He’s almost dropped his bottle of fizzy stuff three whole times — the clear stingy liquid that froths up white when he pours it on his cuts, spittin’ mad about it. He bites down hard when it burns, presses his tongue to the roof of his mouth so no sound slips out. He also thinks maybe it’s ’cause his tummy’s grumbly. Hunger makes everything harder. Hunger makes your hands shake and your head feel light, makes even easy things go wrong.

But there ain’t no more food tonight, not when Mama’s asleep on the couch, smelling like her hugs and kisses gone sour, and Daddy’s got a bottle of Beam open and his boots still on. Nights like this, Jack knows

better than to be seen. He eases the bathroom door shut without a click and wipes the sink clean like he was never there at all.

His tummy can be rumbly in the morning. *Foxes are used to that.*

"So I guess I don't got no silver spoon, huh?" Jack laughs, ten years later, and the sound comes out wrong. He leans over the same cracked porcelain sink, the one with rust blooming around the drain like a bad infection, and spits. Blood and spit and two broken teeth clatter against the bowl, dull little ticks instead of the clean sound he expects. "I got fuckin' barbed wire stuck in my teeth."

He grins at his reflection, toothless and fucked. His mouth looks like it's been taught a lesson the hard way, all gaps and jagged edges. See, there ain't nothing smooth about him. Ain't nothing polished. Whatever silver spoons are for, they weren't made for kids like Jack Abbot. His hands are steadier now than they used to be, but they still shake just a little when he wipes the blood away with the heel of his palm. He thinks about how barbed wire's meant to keep things in — or keep things out. He can't never remember which, all he knows is it tears you either way if you push hard enough, like getting a hand stuck in a snake's mouth — once it's in, you can't get it back out.

Jack bares his teeth again, counting what's left.

Foxes don't get silver spoons.

He killed her, ya know.

His Mama weren't no fox, not like Jack.

Jack still remembers that night, even if he didn't have all the words for it back then. Memory sticks the way burrs do to a saddle, sharp and naggin'. The wind was busy in the trees, worrying at the bare branches till they rattled like bones, and the frost crunched loud underfoot, louder than it had any right to be. He'd been half-asleep when she scooped him up, his freckled face mashed tight between her

jaw and shoulder, the way it always was when she carried him. He remembers how she smelled — like menthols and old pennies. Later, much later, he understands that smell was blood. He sees it then only in pieces: the dark shine on her hairline, the way her skin split open on her forehead so deep he could see yellow-white underneath. Bone, he realizes later.

He tries to talk, tries to ask where they're going, tries to tell her he's cold, that his foot hurts where he stepped on glass earlier. She hushes him real quick and desperate like. The sound she makes don't come out right, thick and broken, like she's got a mouthful of rocks and cotton. It ain't till years after that he understands why. He's broken most of her teeth.

She moves fast, faster than Jack's ever seen her move, barefoot in the frost like she don't feel it at all. She gets to the truck and sets him inside, hands shaking so bad the keys jangle. She locks the door once, then checks it again. Her hands are as white as the crushed snow under her feet, and when she moves them they make the same stiff, scraping sound, like snow packed too tight. Her hands are broken too.

Jack watches from the seat, small and quiet. He has a front row seat to what happens next. Maybe, in another universe, they make it. Maybe the truck starts right away. Maybe the road stays clear. Maybe Daddy doesn't wake up when the door slams. Maybe Mama gets to be something else. Maybe, in another universe, his mother is a fox like him — quick, sharp, made to slip traps and keep running even when hurt. But no, she is a ewe — gentle and soft and never meant for teeth and claws. His father is a wolf, all hunger and rage and jaws that don't let go once they've found a throat.

Jack is a fox.

He watches as her head meets the bed of the truck so forcefully that she doesn't have time to scream. The wolf takes her by the black curls, edged with frost and beats her until her brain matter and blood leak from her ears.

The wolf takes the fox inside and tells him *there was never a ewe at all.*

At twenty-five, Jack still eats like somebody might take it away. He

don't mean to. It's just how his body knows how to do it — shoulders curled forward, elbows tight to his ribs, head bowed so low over the plate his nose near brushes the food. Fork moving fast, wrist flicking, shoveling it in while it's hot, while it's there, while nobody's watching close enough to comment. But Robby comments anyway; nosy fuck that he is.

"Hey," Robby tries gently. He's got a weird voice for a tall man, soft belly straining a little against his med school hoodie. He's got these big hands and that makes him too careful with things, like he's afraid of breaking them. Sheepdog hands, Jack thinks, even if he don't say it out loud. The sort meant for guiding, not grabbing. They're at their tiny kitchen table, knees knocking together because the apartment was built for somebody skinnier and quieter than the two of them. A stack of flashcards sits between the salt shaker and Robby's untouched eggs. Jack's plate is already half gone. He lets Robby fuck him sometimes, like that Disney movie *Fox and the Hound,* at least he thinks that how it went. His father never let him watch girly shit.

"You're gonna choke," Robby pokes.

Jack snorts, mouth still half full, and swallows too fast. His throat burns a little. "Habit," He grunts. "I'm fine, I'm not a choker — you should know that." He grins, missing teeth and all. He don't go to no dentists. Robby thinks that's stupid. Robby thinks a lot of stuff Jack does is stupid, but he still puts his dick in him, so clearly Jack's alright.

Robby watches him anyway, worried dark eyes tracking every movement. Jack can feel it, so he forces himself to slow down, just a bit, but it feels wrong. He don't like it. Robby reaches out, thumb brushing the back of Jack's wrist where the skin's gone shiny from an old burn. Jack flinches before he can stop himself. Robby pulls away instantly, insteada grabbin' harder like a wolf woulda. "Still hurts, baby?"

Jack shrugs, which is easier than answering. "Don't wanna be pawed at."

Robby tries for a smile, but it don't quite land. "You're a vet. You've seen stuff. You don't have to explain it to me, Yankele."

Jack's fork pauses mid-air. There it is. The easy answer, ripe for the picking. The one that fits nice and neat, like stitches that line up right the first time. War stories. Blood and noise and things that die loud.

Robby can wrap his head around that. Jack puts his fork down all careful-like. “It ain’t that,” He tries to be honest, tries to be open. But he feels like he’s diving into a megalodon’s jaws, one of them big ass sharks that coulda swallowed this whole apartment in one bite. Jack looks at the table, at the cheap laminate peeling up at the corners. He thinks about cold beans and counting bites. About learning the exact speed you gotta chew so you don’t piss your old man off. About how hunger teaches lessons that stick to your ribs. “I just learned early,” Jack grits out, finally. “That if you hesitate, you might miss your chance.”

Robby frowns. “At dinner?”

“At *anything*.”

Robby reaches for his salad again but he don’t eat it, he just pushes a tomato slice around with his fork. Wasteful ass. “You don’t have do that here,” He adds softly. “No one is going to take your food, baby. It’s yours.”

Jack knows that. He really does. Robby’s never taken anything from him without asking first. Robby leaves him the last bite when they share shit. Robby checks in. Robby waits. But knowing ain’t the same as believing. See, Jack’s lived his whole life stepping on uncooked grits, he likes the predictability of it. He shoots Robby a toothless smile. “Foxes eat fast,” He sing-songs, like it’s a joke.

Robby blinks. “Foxes?”

“Yeah.” Jack finally looks up. “We don’t like being caught with our heads down, makes us all twitchy.”

Robby studies him for a long moment. Then he nods, slowly, accepting his weirdness, even if he don’t fully understand it. Sheepdogs are good at that — standing watch without needing all them gory details.

Foxes survive by knowing when to run.

Sometimes, they survive by staying put.

Jack is a good fuck, so he gets to stay put.

The cut happens *stupid*.

Jack's elbow-deep in the sink, trying to muscle a rusted fitting loose under the faucet, jaw clenched around a cigarette he ain't lit yet. The wrench slips. Metal kisses skin. There's a sharp, clean sting and then heat, like somebody pressed a match to him. "Son of a—" He jerks his hand back. The blood wells up quick and bright along the pad of his index finger, fat droplets sliding down his knuckle to splatter in the sink. It don't even hurt that bad. Jack sucks the finger into his mouth on reflex, tongue flattening against the cut, copper taste blooming sharp and familiar along his tastebuds.

Robby pokes his head in from the living room. "You good?"

"Yeah," Jack grumbles around his finger. He pulls it out, checks the damage. It's deeper than he likes — gaping just a little when he flexes, edges pale and bloodless. "Just bit myself."

Robby squints. "You bit your finger?"

Jack grins, blood on his remaining teeth. "Maybe."

"Oh *shit*. Jack, that's *really* bleeding."

"So?" Jack says, like that settles it. He turns back to the sink, runs cold water over the cut. The sting wakes it up proper, sends a bright line of pain up his arm. He welcomes it. Pain's honest. Pain don't sneak up on you. Until Robby reaches for his wrist and Jack pulls away without thinking. "I got it," He snaps, eyes gone wild. *Wrench, toolkit, soap dish.* Weapon, weapon, weapon.

Robby freezes, hands hovering in the air between them. "Sorry, Yankl. I didn't mean to scare you. Can I see anyway?"

Jack keeps his eyes on the water. "Ain't nothing to see."

Later that night, his finger is swollen. Red creeping past the knuckle, skin shiny and tight like it's been stretched too far. It throbs in time with his heartbeat, a deep, mean ache that don't care how tough you think you are. Jack notices. He just don't say nothing. He cleans it himself again, jaw set, teeth grinding when the antiseptic bites. He don't stitch it — too messy, too late — but he tapes it tight, wraps it neat. He's good at neat. By morning, there's heat. By that afternoon, there's a faint yellow seep through the gauze. Robby notices that part.

“Yankl,” He says, quiet but firm, when Jack drops his bag by the door after his shift and sits to yank his leg off. “Your finger.”

Jack shrugs his jacket off one-handed. “What about it?”

“It smells,” Robby points out; nosy fuck. “And it’s red.”

Jack flexes the finger. Pain flares, sharp enough to make his eyes water for half a second. He smiles wider. “Means it’s healing.”

“You know that’s not what that means.”

Jack turns on him then. “You a fully-fledged doctor now, asshole? In infectious disease? You wanna sniff it proper-like?! Fuckin’ mutt.” He laughs. It comes out wrong. “You think a little infection’s gonna take me out? Get the fuck off my case, Rob.”

“I think untreated infections kill people all the time,” Robby don’t budge.

I think you’re too stupid to have my dick in you, he hears. He peels the tape off right there, the skin underneath is angry-red, swollen, a thin line of pus glistening along the cut. It throbs and Robby goes pale. “Oh, my — *fuck*, Jack. We need to go into a clinic right now.”

But Jack just stares at Robby and presses on it, hard. Pain explodes white-hot, shoots up his arm, makes his knees wobble. Thick yellow pus wells up, ugly and undeniable. Jack bites back a groan, eyes watering despite himself. Robby makes a sound: small, broken, hands outstretched. “Stop! Stop! What the hell are you doing?!”

Good, some mean part of Jack thinks. *Good. Let’s see how far this goes. Let’s see how far I can push before the sheepdog realizes he’s got teeth*. “Ain’t dead yet,” Jack slurs, breath coming a little fast. He presses again, harder, like he’s daring the wound to argue back, daring Robby to try any of that sweet shit on him now. “See? *Foxes are hard to kill.”*

Robby finally lunges forward and grabs his wrist. Jack expects the snap of the bones any second now. Instead — he immediately lets go of Jack’s wrist and cups his hand instead, careful not to touch the cut. His hands are warm, big, soft. He’s crying; that stumps Jack completely, Robby ain’t hurtin’, *so what’s he crying for?* “Let me take care of you,” Robby begs. “Please, bubbeleh.”

Jack looks down at their joined hands. Blood’s smeared across his knuckles, ugly against Robby’s skin. He thinks about how foxes keep

moving even when they're rotting from the inside out, sometimes they get so full of tumors they come out they eyes. His throat tightens. "…I don't wanna be seen," He admits finally. "Don't wanna be somebody's problem. This ain't hospital shit."

"Baby, this needs antibiotics." Robby's thumb strokes the side of his hand. "Please. Please, baby, for me."

Foxes survive by enduring pain.

Sometimes, they survive by letting someone else tend the wound.

"Fine, just quit your cryin'."

"You said you'd wipe it," Robby says, tired more than mad, pointing at the counter. Jack's already on edge. He's been like that all day — finger aching under the bandage, skin pulled tight, nerves rubbed raw. He hears accusation where there ain't one. Feels cornered by a sentence that don't mean much. He just wants Robby to fuck him already.

"I was *gonna*," Jack argues.

"Then why didn't you?"

Jack shrugs, sharp and defensive. "Because it don't matter."

Robby frowns. "It matters to *me*."

That's when Jack snaps. "Oh, for fuck's sake," He snaps, laugh brittle. "It's a cup ring, asshole."

Robby lifts his hand, an instinctive motion, palm up, like he's about to gesture, about to talk with his hands the way he always does when he's trying to explain something. Jack flinches — shoulders jerk up, chin tucks, his bad hand curls in toward his chest while the other comes up half-formed, defensive, like he don't even know what he's blocking against. His eyes squeeze shut for a split second too long. When nothing comes, Jack opens his eyes, confusion spreading across his face when he realizes nothing's actually coming. *No blow. No shout.* Only Robby standing there, hand frozen in midair like it don't belong to him anymore. His face just crumples. "What?" Jack asks, pouting.

“What’d I do now?”

“I,” Robby wheezes, already backing toward the bathroom, tears welling in his eyes, face going red. “I need —”

Jack frowns. “Rob? *Mikey, what the fuck?!”*

Robby barely makes it to the sink before he’s dry-heaving, body folding in on itself, hands braced hard against the porcelain. Nothing comes up, but his throat visibly spasms like it wants to dump out his guts anyway. Jack stands in the doorway, baffled. “What the hell is wrong with you?” He asks, completely lost. “Is your belly hurtin’ or somethin’?” He reaches out for Robby’s pudge, it don’t look bloated or nothin’. But sometimes Robby stresses himself sick. Jack can usually rub him better. But this don’t look right.

Robby can’t look at him. He shakes his head, “I lifted my hand,” He whispers hoarsely. “And you *hid* from me.”

Jack snorts, trying for light, missing by a mile. “Aw fuck, that? You startled me, that’s all. C’mon, baby, you had me thinkin’ you felt sick.”

“That wasn’t startled,” Robby argues, he finally turns around, eyes red and wet. “Jack, you looked like you were about to get hit, like you thought I was going to hit you. *Why would I ever?!”*

Jack’s brow furrows deeper. He thinks about it, honest. Replays the moment in his head. The raised hand. The tight chest. The reflex. “So?” He shrugs. “That’s just reflexes. You startle a fox, it jumps.”

“That isn’t *normal*.”

Jack rolls his eyes with a holey grin. “Sure it is. You ever been around animals, *city boy?”*

“I’m not talking about *animals*,” Robby snaps. “I’m talking about *you*, Jacob.”

Jack crosses his arms, defensive now, jaw set. “You didn’t do anything. I ain’t mad. Why are you acting like somebody off and died? Just c’mere and let me hold you.”

Robby laughs, short and hysterical, then clamps a hand over his mouth like he might actually puke this time. “Because,” He sniffles, absolutely devastated, “The person I love most in the world just flinched like he expects violence from me. I would *never*.”

Jack goes very still. “That ain’t what that was,” He argues softly.

“Then what was it?”

Jack genuinely don’t have an answer that makes sense outside his own skin. “I don’t know,” He admits. “It’s just how my body moves. Don’t mean nothing.”

Robby stares at him like he’s speaking another language. “It means everything,” Robby stresses. His voice drops, raw and wrecked. “I would never — Jack, I would never hit you. Ever.”

Jack’s throat tightens, irritation flaring hot to cover the discomfort underneath. “I know that.”

“No,” Robby shakes his head, stepping closer despite himself. “You don’t. *Not really.* If you did, your body wouldn’t be acting like that.”

Jack looks away first.

“I ain’t broken,” He mutters.

Robby’s eyes fill again. “I didn’t say you were.”

Jack rubs a hand over his face, tired now, defensive slipping into something smaller. “Then why are you so messed up about it, asshole?”

“Because *I love you.”*

Jack exhales slow. He don’t know what to do with that. Don’t know why that should make someone feel sick instead of safe. “…It was just a flinch,” He says, quieter now. “C’mere.”

Robby nods, swallowing hard as he folds himself into Jack’s arms. “Yeah.”

They stand there, the stupid argument forgotten, the counter still unwiped.

He knows this ol’ mutt isn’t gonna hit him. Robby ain’t never hit him. His hand finds that belly for rubs and Robby starts to cry for some reason. *Jack ain’t never understood dogs.*

Robby makes apple cake later that afternoon — music low, sleeves pushed up, flour smudged on his cheeks. He peels the apples slowly, careful to get the skins off in long spirals, the way his Bubbe taught him. Cinnamon blooms warm and sweet in the kitchen, mixing with butter and sugar until the whole apartment smells like a rich people candle. Jack watches from the doorway, arms crossed, leaning on his crutches. “You didn’t have to do all that,” He grumbles.

Robby glances over his shoulder. “I wanted to.”

That’s that, then. They eat it while it’s still warm, cake soft and steaming, apples tender enough to collapse under the fork. It’s good, really good: sweet and heavy and rich. But Jack’s gut knows right away it’s a mistake. He ain’t never been good with apples. The first bite is fine. The second is pushing it. By the third, there’s a dull pressure starting, a fullness that ain’t right — like his body’s already raising a red flag. He ignores it and keeps on eating. Fork moving steady, glimpses of Robby’s proud little smile seeing him through. But by the time he scrapes the last crumbs off his plate, Jack’s belly feels like it’s been packed tight with wet cement. Bloated, stretched, skin pulling uncomfortable under his shirt. There’s a slow, rolling nausea under it all, not sharp enough to stop him, just enough to make him sweat. *He feels real bad.* But Robby looks so proud and shit, Jack ain’t about to ruin it, not when he just got his boy feelin’ better.

“You okay?” Robby frowns. “You look wiped, bubbeleh.”

“Fine.”

He ain’t fine.

The evening drags. Jack shifts on the couch, remaining foot bouncing, hand unconsciously pressing against his belly like he can knead the hurt out like a batch of dough. Every movement pulls, sends a sluggish wave of queasiness up his throat. He swallows it back down. Foxes don’t puke unless they have to. They ain’t losin’ good calories to weak shit like a tummyache. When it’s finally time for bed, Jack stands up too fast to grab his crutches and has to pause, one hand braced on the back of the couch while the room tilts.

Robby notices. He immediately grabs Jack’s crutches and tries to situate him. But Jack snatches them and shoves him off. “You’re being an irritable little ass, Yankele.” He knows he is. Robby rolls his eyes. “Change your tune.”

Jack snorts, half laugh, half growl. “Fuck you.” He limps toward the bedroom, peeling his jeans off with more effort than usual. His belly is visibly distended now, round and tight beneath his undershirt, skin warm and flushed. He grimaces as he tugs his sleep pants on, fabric catching and bunching wrong around the swell. “Goddammit,” He mutters, hopping a little as he tries to settle the waistband lower without pressing too hard on his new snow-globe of a gut. Everything feels wrong — too tight, too much, too noticeable. He feels sour on the inside. He oughta just park it on the toilet and lock the door.

Robby leans against the doorframe, arms crossed. “You know, if you weren’t such a crank tonight…”

Jack answers without looking, flipping him off, middle finger snapping up. “Bite me, mutt.”

But he makes the unfortunate decision to turn to the side as he does it. Robby’s smile drops instantly. He straightens, eyes softening as he comes over with that fuckin’ fussy shit. “Fuck, Jack…”

Jack freezes mid-adjustment, fingers tangled in his waistband. The sudden shift hits him like cold water in the worst ways. See, he can handle ribbing, he knows how to deal with the shit talkin’, he and Robby do that all day long. But this, this sweet fussy shit, slides right under his guard. “I’m fine,” Jack growls, sharper now. “Don’t start. You know I ain’t good with apples.”

Robby looks devastated. “*No I didn't!* Baby, I wouldn’t have made it.”

Jack slaps his hand away, not hard but fast. “Well, you made it,” He snaps. “You went through all that trouble. I wasn’t gonna be a dick about it. Fuckin’ sue me.”

Robby’s face crumples a little at that, Jack don’t like it when his shit makes Robby look all sad and mopey. He’s fucked up enough today already. “Yankl, I don’t want you hurting yourself just to spare my feelings.”

His jaw locks. “I ain’t hurting myself,” He grits out. “It’s just food.”

“It’s not just food if it makes you sick; it’s harm.”

Jack finally looks at him, eyes bright and agitated. “Why are you making such a big deal out of everything tonight? I don’t like it when you do that,” He snaps.

“Do what?”

“That,” Jack points, waving a vague hand between them. “*Switch* like that.”

Robby blinks. “To taking care of you?”

Jack winces like the words sting. “Yeah. That.”

“Why?”

Jack drags a hand through his curls, frustrated, restless. “‘Cause I don’t need all that shit. I can deal with you calling me an ass,” Jack cuts in. “I know where I stand with that. But when you start worryin’ and fussin’ like I’m—” He trails off, words failing him.

“Like you’re the man I love.”

Jack’s hands curl into fists at his sides. His stomach rolls again, “I just don’t want it shoved at me when I didn’t ask for it. Do you wanna fuck or what?” He eases himself onto the bed, careful of his belly, one arm braced behind him. He still feels like shit, but Robby doesn’t climb on him or nothin’, he turns off the light and slides in beside him, Jack stares up at the ceiling, gut aching, nerves buzzing. He don’t fight it when Robby scoots in to hold him. He just pouts when those hands don’t go any lower. Jack knows his body well enough to do the math. Apples plus sugar plus whatever the hell his gut decided to be mad about tonight means there’s only two possible endings, and neither of them are the kind that invites company. He’s either gonna be constipated as fuck for the next two days, bloated and miserable and full of regret, or he’s gonna be up every half hour shitting his soul out like his intestines are trying to escape without him, like tapeworms wobbling outta his ass — flat and squirmy. There ain’t no third option.

“Too warm?” Robby asks him quietly, lips checkin’ his temp and shit.

Jack grunts. “I’m fine.” But once Robby is down for the count. He scoots away to lie on his back, staring into the dark, then he shifts onto his side, then the other. Nothing helps. The pressure in him builds slow and mean. At first, it’s just discomfort — a fuckin’ fullness that won’t ease, a dull ache under his ribs. Then it tightens and twists. It sharpens into something deeper, grabbing hold of his insides and squeezing like a fist made of embers, sizzling up his meat. Jack sucks in a breath through his nose, slow and careful. Lets it out even slower. Foxes endure, they don’t make a big deal out of a tummyache. Another cramp rolls through him, worse than the first. His belly

clenches hard, muscles drawing tight against the pressure inside of him, like a fuckin' can of biscuits. Sweat prickles along his hairline. He curls forward without thinking, knees drawing up a little, one hand pressing flat against his rock hard belly like he can hold it together by force alone. It keeps swellin'.

Pain don't scare him. Pain's familiar. But this is the kind that drags, that don't peak and pass, just coils tighter the more you notice it. His fingers dig into his shirt, knuckles white. Another cramp hits and he bites down on the inside of his cheek to keep from making a noise.

Beside him, Robby stirs. Jack feels it immediately: the shift of weight, the change in breathing. Sheepdog instincts that never really sleep. "Jack?" Robby whispers. "You okay?"

Jack doesn't answer. He focuses on breathing. *On counting. On not throwing up or bolting for the bathroom.*

Robby props himself up on one elbow, squinting in the dark. "Bubbeleh," He tries, more awake now. "You're shaking."

Jack exhales through his teeth, irritation flaring hot on top of the pain. "Go back to sleep."

Robby reaches out, hand hovering near Jack's back. "Your belly?"

"Fuck off," Jack snaps, sharper than he means to. "I said I'm fine, asshole. Go back to sleep." The words come out ragged, strained around another cramp that folds him tighter in on himself. His hand presses harder into his belly, breath hiccuping despite his best effort. Robby goes still and there's a soft click as light floods the room again. Jack squeezes his eyes shut on instinct, jaw clenched hard as another wave of pain rolls through him. He's curled tight now, one arm wrapped across his middle, the other braced against the mattress. Sweat shines on his skin, curls stuck at the temples. He feels like fuckin' *shit*.

"Oh, my love," Robby sighs quietly. Hands reaching to paw at his belly.

Jack opens one eye, glare ready, pride flaring even through the pain. "I told you to fuck off. It'll pass, just give it a minute."

Robby reaches for him again, slower this time, giving Jack every chance to stop him. "Let me help, bubbeleh."

Jack laughs around a gag. “Ain’t like you can shit it out for me.” He closes his eyes again, teeth gritted, hands firm against his belly as the cramps claw through him.

“Tell me what helps.”

Jack keeps his eyes shut, another cramp rolls through him, slow and punishing, and he curls tighter around it, forearm pressed hard into his gut like pressure might scare it off. “Nothin’,” He grits out through his aching teeth.

“That’s *bullshit*.”

Jack opens one eye and glares at him. “You’re not gonna like it, asshole.”

“I didn’t ask what I’d like,” Robby scowls. “I asked what *helps*.”

Jack shifts, the movement sending another sharp squeeze through his poor gut. He hisses quietly, fingers digging into his shirt. “Cigarette,” He whines. “And a bottle of Schweppes.”

“Of course.”

“See? Told you. You’re always up my ass about smokin’.”

“It’s bad for you, bashert,” Robby argues automatically, then stops himself. He rubs a hand down his scruffy face. “But I also know nicotine can kick the gut into gear and ginger ale’s not exactly witchcraft.”

“Schweppes ain’t ginger ale,” Jack grunts. “It’s *bitter*. Works better.”

“Okay, I’ll get the stuff.”

Jack’s lips twitch. He shifts again, discomfort flaring, then adds almost as an afterthought, voice rough and low, “…Maybe castor oil.” He remembers being real small, his Mama giving him heaping spoonfuls of the stuff to get him movin’ when too many days of roadkill stew made for a backed-up baby. There ain’t been no money for pediatricians. He was just gonna get on, one way or another.

Robby slowly turns his head to look at him. “No,” He states flatly, not a fuckin’ question about it.

Jack frowns, affronted even through the pain. “It *works*, asshole.”

“It absolutely does not,” Robby snaps. “It violently flushes out your intestines.”

“That’s the point.”

“That is *not* the point,” Robby says, volume rising. He plants a hand on the mattress like he’s bracing himself to be a self-righteous ass. “Jack, that stuff will have you doubled over worse than this, sweating, cramping, and glued to the toilet for hours.”

Jack shrugs weakly. “Gets the job done.”

Robby stares at him, incredulous. “You are not drinking castor oil in our home.”

Jack bristles, pain and pride tangling ugly in his chest. “You don’t get to tell me shit! You ain’t the boss of me! I’ll do whatever I damn well please.”

“I absolutely do,” Robby cuts in, foot firmly down now. “You’re already miserable and dehydrated.”

Jack bares his teeth. “It’s *my* gut. You always gotta—” He breaks off, breath escaping in a whine. “Control everythin’.”

Robby softens, reaches out slowly, palm hovering near Jack’s back. “I’m not trying to control you. I’m trying to keep you from making it worse. I’ll get you the Schweppes and *fuck*, I guess the cigarette too, I’ll stand on the balcony and glare at you while you smoke it.”

“You’re a pain in my ass.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Robby agrees quietly. “But I’m not letting you drink *castor oil,* baby.”

Jack closes his eyes again, another wave rolling through him. *Foxes endure. Sheepdogs, apparently, draw lines.*

Robby caves on the easy parts. He doesn’t say it out loud, but there’s relief in having a task to do, some way to help. Something he can do, that isn’t just watching Jack curl in on himself and grit his teeth like some kind of dying animal. Part of him worries that if he looks away

too long, Jack is going to force himself into some sort of hideyhole to die in secret. “I’ll be right back,” He warns, already standing. “Don’t move.”

Jack huffs a breathy, sarcastic laugh from where he’s folded around his gut. “Little late for that, mutt.”

Robby shoots him a look and heads for the kitchen. He grabs a bottle of Schweppes from the fridge, then pauses by the balcony door. He hesitates just a beat before snagging Jack’s cigarettes and Bic off the counter too, tucking them under his arm. He hates the damage to Jack’s lungs, but at this moment that seems more survivable than the incoming wound to Jack’s pride. But by the time he turns back down the hall, there’s a sound that stops him cold. It’s a cry: low at first, then breaking higher, desperate and feral. It echoes, panicked and pained and unmistakably urgent. Along with the sound of a frantic dash to the bathroom on one crutch — and a *fall*.

“Oh *fuck*.”

The bathroom door is shut. Robby can see Jack’s crutch kicked sideways against the bottom, like he shoved it there in a hurry. The light inside is on, glaring under the doorframe. The ensuing sounds of gagging and sobbing are unmistakable, but fuck. Robby drops everything. The Schweppes hits the carpet and rolls. The cigarettes scatter. He’s at the door in seconds, knocking hard, palm flat.

“Jack, baby,” He calls through the wood,. “It’s okay. I’m here. You’re okay.” There’s no answer, just another retching noise from inside. The toilet flushes once, twice, then again, like Jack’s panicking and doesn’t know why he’s doing it, just knows something is very wrong inside him. Robby’s chest aches, he needs to be in there. He knocks again, softer this time, closed fist. “Let me in, sweetheart. You must feel awful. I can rub your back, get a wet towel.”

“Are you fuckin with me?! *Fuck off, Robby!”*

All Robby can hear is how wrecked Jack’s voice is — pitched high with strain and embarrassment and pain all tangled together. There’s a thump, like Jack shifted wrong or tried to stand and failed. Robby can’t bear it. He can’t bear the idea of Jack, pale and spent and shivering, left to lie there alone. “Baby, please.”

There’s a pause. Then another wail, muffled this time, like Jack’s shoved his face into a towel or his arm or the crook of his elbow to keep it from getting out. “I told you to leave me alone,” Jack pants

weakly from the other side. "'m sick."

Robby presses his forehead to the door, eyes squeezed shut. "I only left for a minute. I brought what you asked for."

"I didn't ask for you to do shit! Go away." Jack breaks off with a sharp, breathless sound that twists Robby's own gut. "Oh, fuck, *fuck!"* Another flush. Another miserable gag.

Robby's heart is pounding now, hard enough he can feel it in his throat. "Jack, open the door."

"Can't," Jack snaps. "*Occupied.*"

"*Yankl.*"

There's a long, shaky silence, broken only by the sound of harsh breathing and something else — movement, frantic and clumsy. The slap of flushed skin against tile. A whimper Jack clearly doesn't mean to make. Robby's hands curl into fists at his sides. "Okay," He tries softly, shifting tactics. "Okay. Please just tell me what's happening."

A bitter, hysterical laugh bubbles out from inside. "What the fuck do you *think's* happening?"

"The apples?" Robby guesses, even though he already knows.

"No shit," Jack grunts, then groans, long and pained. "God, Robby, my gut is fucked." Another wet retch follows and a choked curse. "Just shut up," He gags. "*Please.*"

Robby swallows hard. "Okay, but I'm right here."

There's a shuffling sound, then Jack's voice again, smaller now, panting. "Don't come in."

"I won't," Robby promises instantly. "I won't unless you ask. You call the shots, baby."

"…Okay."

Robby slides down until he's sitting on the floor with his back against the door, knees drawn up. He doesn't touch the handle. He just stays there, solid and present. "I've got the Schweppes," He says quietly, eyeing where it rolled. "Cold. Whenever you're ready."

Jack doesn't answer. Robby closes his eyes, jaw tight, and stays put.

It takes a while, long enough that Robby's legs fall asleep where he's sitting on the bathroom floor, back pressed to the door, long enough that the sounds inside shift from frantic to miserable to exhausted. The sharp edges dull. The retching slows. The flush comes one last time, weaker than before, followed by nothing but ragged breathing and the faint creak of tile as Jack slumps somewhere out of sight. He hates the idea of Jack being so weak and fatigued by himself, but he won't touch the handle. He won't steal that autonomy away. "Jack?" He tries softly. "Hey. You still with me, bubbeleh?"

Then, from the other side of the door, Jack answers — small and spent. "…Yeah."

Robby's heart twists. "Okay," He winces, keeping his voice light, hopeful. "I'm gonna come in now, alright?" He reaches for the handle.

"Wait."

Robby stills instantly. "Okay. I'm waiting."

There's a faint scuffing sound, like Jack shifting on the floor. "You don't gotta come in. Just, can you *knock* again?"

Robby frowns, confused. "Knock?"

"Yeah," Jack grunts. He swallows audibly. "If you knock again, the towels'll fall, the ones hanging on the door."

Robby's stomach drops. "…Why?" He asks, even though some awful part of him already knows.

"So I can sleep here," Jack slurs quietly. "No mess in the bed."

The image slams into him fully formed: Jack curled on the bathroom floor, sweaty and shaking, resting his head on a pile of dirty damp towels. Horror washes through him, hot and dizzying. "Oh, baby," He sighs. "No. *No, no, no."*

Jack goes still on the other side of the door.

"It's fine," Jack says quickly, too quick. "I've done it before. I don't wanna mess up the bed."

"Jack," Robby cuts in, voice shaking now. "Shut up. I'm putting you in *our* bed."

Jack just laughs, weak and disbelieving. "I ain't exactly *presentable*,

asshole."

"I do not give a single solitary *shit*," Robby snarls. He presses his palm flat against the door, like he can reach Jack through it. "You are *not* sleeping on the bathroom floor." There's another long pause. Robby can hear Jack's breathing again — *slow, hiccupy, shaky*. He imagines him sitting there, back pressed against the tub or the wall, arms wrapped around his sore belly like he's holding himself together.

"…Okay," He whimpers.

Robby opens the door and the sight breaks his heart into more pieces than he thought possible. Jack is slumped on the floor by the toilet, curls plastered to his forehead with sweat. His face is pale, eyes glassy and rimmed red, one arm is wrapped around his belly, the other braced weakly against the tile. He looks so dehydrated and fragile. He crouches immediately. "There you are."

Jack looks up at him, eyes unfocused, fox sharpness dulled down to something raw and tired. "Told you I was *fine*."

Robby doesn't argue. He just slides an arm behind Jack's back, another under his knees. "Up we go."

Jack makes a small protesting noise but doesn't fight. In fact, he doesn't say anything on the way to the bed. Robby eases him down onto a new set of clean sheets and tucks the duvet around him again. He brings the trash can closer and sets the Schweppes on the nightstand within reach. Jack's stomach gives another unhappy gurgle, lower and quieter this time, and he winces anyway, fingers curling into the sheet. "My belly hurts," He mutters, sounding very young and very hurt.

Robby hums sympathetically, palm flattening over Jack's belly through the blanket. "I know, baby. I'm sorry."

"Are you gonna make me eat tomorrow?"

Robby's brow furrows, confused, "Yes? You need the *nutrients*, baby. Probably something light and easy. Why?"

Jack rolls onto his back with a huff, one hand still resting protectively over his swollen gut. "I usually just don't." He stares at the ceiling, matter-of-fact. "For about three days. Let everything settle. No point wasting food if it's just gonna come right back up."

Robby props himself up on one elbow, looking down at Jack. “You what?”

Jack shrugs, small. “Works. I’ve been doing it forever.”

“Yeah,” Robby sighs. “I can tell.”

“Don’t start,” Jack’s jaw tightens. “I ain’t fragile or nothin’.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

“You’re thinkin’ it.”

“No, I’m thinking *fuck that shit,”* Robby growls, voice firm but not raised. “You’re *sick*.”

Jack’s stomach gives another uncomfortable roll, like it’s listening in. He grimaces. “It hurts.”

“I know it does,” Robby says gently. He reaches down, thumb rubbing slow circles just above Jack’s navel. “That’s why we start light. Toast, juice.”

Jack exhales through his nose. “Asshole.” He flips him off weakly.

Robby catches the finger and kisses the knuckle. “You’ll be eating your toast, baby.” He settles back beside his idiot and tugs the comforter up around them both, “You’re gonna let me bring you half a slice in the morning and you can whine the whole time while you chew.” Jack sighs, long and tired, the fight draining out of him. His hand slides back to rest over Robby’s arm, grip loose but desperate. He clearly doesn’t want to be alone, but Robby would bet on him never admitting it.

“…Fine,” He yawns. “But if it hurts…”

“We stop and give your belly a minute to rest.”

Jack closes his eyes. “Fuck you and your bullshit fussin’.” *You can’t go no place, okay?*

“I love you too, Yankele.” *I would never.*

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